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Wallpaper News of the Sixties

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HISTORY No. 3

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Wallpaper News of the Sixties

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF
THE INTERIOR, HAROLD L. ICKES, *Secretary*

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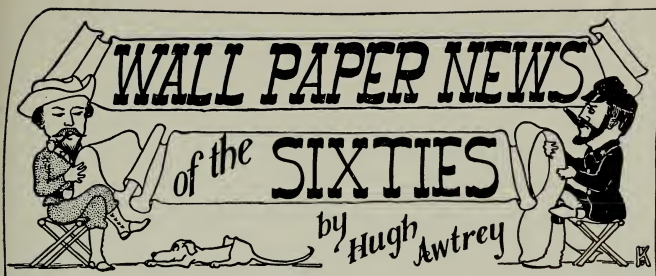


HISTORICAL units of the national park system include fields of battle, birthplaces of famous men, memorials of superlative contributions to human progress, and physical mementoes of many another episode that illuminates the career of a nation. Whether they recite stories of war or of peace, of a single individual's impress upon the centuries' record, or of the collective achievement of America as an astonishing crucible of the world's races, they usually embody a central historical theme. Such fundamental narratives are familiar enough, for they are phasic chapters of national history and form the principal outline of the expanding chronicle of man's endeavors west of the Atlantic Ocean.

Increasingly diverting today, therefore, are the growing footnotes which project revealing spotlights on the skeletal story. Humble second-thoughts, they clothe the stark silhouettes of the bony frame and provide the meatier upholstery of

romance for the gaunt ribwork of common fact. Paradoxically, the lower-page fine print day by day is making more entertainingly readable the capital letters of the text.

An ancient rifle may speak more eloquently than wordy tomes of George Washington at Fort Necessity; a primitive kitchen sometimes may excel the historian in recounting the struggles of frontier life; or an old wharf may evoke, far better than a multidegreed researcher, the glories of Yankee ships that defied Britannia's seas. All these are but modest annotations of a greater work, but they afford refreshing pauses which encourage the reader to keep his book open.

Such a footnote to America's history is to be found in the museum of Vicksburg National Military Park, Miss., where a rectangular scrap of paper symbolizes, with a sparkle of ironical humor, one of the many grim battles which journalism has survived on this continent in its climb from the lowly station of a tolerated evil to the happier position of a public necessity. It is a copy of *The* (Vicksburg) *Daily Citizen*, issued July 4, 1863, at the end of the 47-day siege of the famous river port during the War between the States. It relates, by suggestion, a far more significant story than is told literally in its meager columns. It was printed first by a beleaguered Confederate editor and then, with pointed emendations, by Union victors. The back of the single sheet is not printed at all in the usual sense—because it is befigured wallpaper.

The occurrence is a trifling but instructive episode of the vicissitudinous development of paper, that all-powerful instrument for the diffusion of knowledge, which had its traditional origins nearly twenty centuries ago in the inventions of Ts'ai Lun, an ingenious Chinese who lived in what now is war-torn Hunan Province.[1] Paper has been made from an almost incredible variety of substances ranging alphabetically from asbestos, cabbage and dandelion roots, through potatoes,

thistles and wasps' nests. In such contempt was it held in the twelfth century, as opposed to parchment (from sheep and goats) and vellum (from calves), that documents written upon it were held to be without legal authority.[2]

Wood pulp paper, the staff of life of the voracious press of today, did not reach the experimental stage until 1800, and the mass production sulphite process was not devised until 1874.[3] There have been many periods of paper scarcity, and consequently of price fluctuations which often took their roots in frank and homey soil. The growing ascendency of linen over woolen underwear in France during the fifteenth century provided cheaper rags for paper makers and nurtured the timid growth of printing.[4] The resulting premium placed on the casual remnants of one's more personal garments must have been transplanted in America by early colonists, for John Holme, who wrote in 1696 *A True Relation of the Flourish-*

ing State of Pennsylvania (said to be the first metrical composition of that Quaker region), admonished his fellow citizens:

> Kind friend, when thy old shift is rent
> Let it to th' paper mill be sent.[5]

More earnest still was the poetic entreaty of an up-State New York paper maker of the eighteenth century, who published a notice to fair householders of his day:

> Sweet ladies pray be not offended,
> Nor mind the jest of sneering wags;
> No harm, believe us, is intended,
> When humbly, we request your rags.[6]

Scarcity of paper was not uncommon in later Colonial days and particularly during the Revolutionary War when importations ceased and several of the 40-odd American mills halted production.[7] Even near the end of the century, so hard beset with printing woes was John Scull, founder of *The Pittsburgh Gazette* (1786), that he had to procure from the fort commandant the material upon which to publish his journal: ". . . twenty-seven quires of cartridge paper,"[8] a notable instance which conceivably may be the substantiating exception to the rule that the pen is more potent than the sidearm. The first mill "beyond" the Alleghenies was not established until 1793, and the West suffered shortages throughout the period of its early expansion.

Confronted by this somewhat forbidding historical background in which the role of paper was often conspicuous by its dearth, the South was warned in 1860 by *The New Orleans Bulletin* that it should temper its opinions on secession until it became independent of Northern ink, type, presses, and paper.[9] In 1852 the United States was importing rags from 32 countries, and its consumption of paper already had equalled that of England and France combined.[10] Yet, by 1860, with 555 paper-making plants in the country, only 24 were operating in the South.

Three different patterns of wallpaper are found among the known originals of the July 2–4 issue of The Daily Citizen. *The one shown above is the back of one of the sheets preserved in the Library of Congress.*

The admonition of *The Bulletin* probably was soon forgotten, but fulfillment of its implied prophecy was not long delayed. The outbreak of war, with the resulting cessation of paper shipments from the North, was reflected quickly in a shortage of printing stock. As early as September 1, 1861, *The Charleston Courier*, a leading mouthpiece of the Confederacy, was compelled to reduce the size of its pages. Progressive shrinkages followed periodically throughout the lengthening years of the struggle until, by February 1865, that journal appeared as a four-columned sheet of 10 by 15 inches.

Some newspapers collected their own rags, some raised subscription prices as high as $120 a year, some rejected orders for any period exceeding 60 days, and some led a peripatetic existence, publishing here today and there tomorrow (even in railroad freight cars), as they fled approaching invaders and sought new sources of printing supplies. Many suspended publication altogether.

Among those which managed to survive the famine of paper and other misfortunes of war, several were forced to resort to heroic measures. Long established organs appeared on wrapping paper, tissue paper, writing paper, ledger paper, and, in final extremities, on odds and ends of wallpaper of many hues and patterns. Dainty bedroom designs featuring the interwoven tendrils of vague and unbotanical plants often vied, in the same edition of a journal containing the affrighting news of battle, with the more formal geometric whimsies of the living room and library.

At least 13 newspapers, all of them published in Louisiana and Mississippi, are known definitely to have been printed on wallpaper. Of these, 31 different issues have been found in the larger repositories of the country by Clarence S. Brigham, director of the American Antiquarian Society, who believes that many others may have appeared, only to be discarded as of trifling value because readers were interested in the stirring

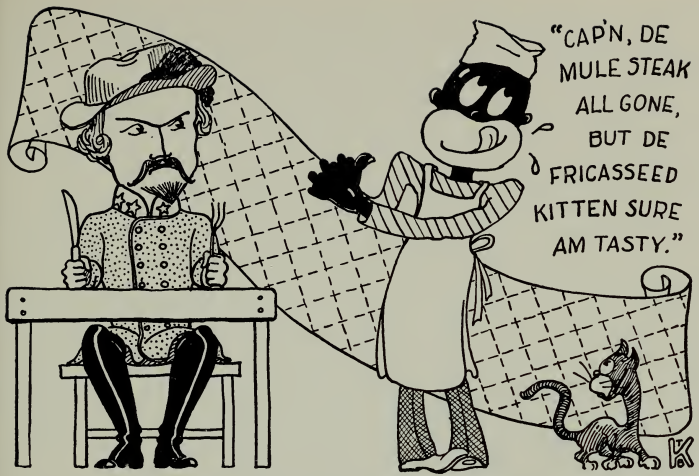
news of victory or defeat rather than in the stop-gap fashion by which it was disseminated.[11] Institutionally catalogued specimens include Louisiana organs edited in both English and French, such as *Le Courrier des Opelousas;* the *Unconditional S. Grant*, an army sheet published in 1863 by Federal troops stationed at New Iberia, and *The* (Alexandria) *Southern Sentinel.* The harassed sponsor of the latter journal, in his issue of March 21, 1863, lamented editorially:

> Even the apology for paper which we are forced to use to print one page on, and which we will change for the better as soon as possible, costs four or five times as much as a full sheet of four pages would have done two years since. . . .

Most interesting of all the wallpaper press, however, is Vicksburg's *Daily Citizen*, edited by J. M. Swords in an easy-going town seated comfortably on the river bluffs where, for 47 days, Confederate forces made a last stand for control of the lower Mississippi. In the prewar days of 1860 *The Citizen* was a four-page newspaper of full dimensions. Even by June 13, 1863, after 26 days of a siege whose encircling fetters General Grant drew ever tighter, Editor Swords' daily account of the progress of war appeared on genuine newsprint. But the thin fingers of scarcity already had begun to pinch. *The Citizen* that day was a single sheet, two columns wide. Yet, however modest the format of the journal, it must have enjoyed a demand sufficiently brisk to inspire street-corner profiteering. That became evident 5 days later when the hard-pressed Swords explained to his readers:

> The price of our paper at the office is twenty-five cents. Newsboys who charge fifty cents on the streets are not authorized by us to sell at that price; and those who object to the extortion should call at the office and get their papers at first cost. We cannot control the trade nor the prices of newsboys and can only sell our papers to them at the same prices that we get from those who call at the office.

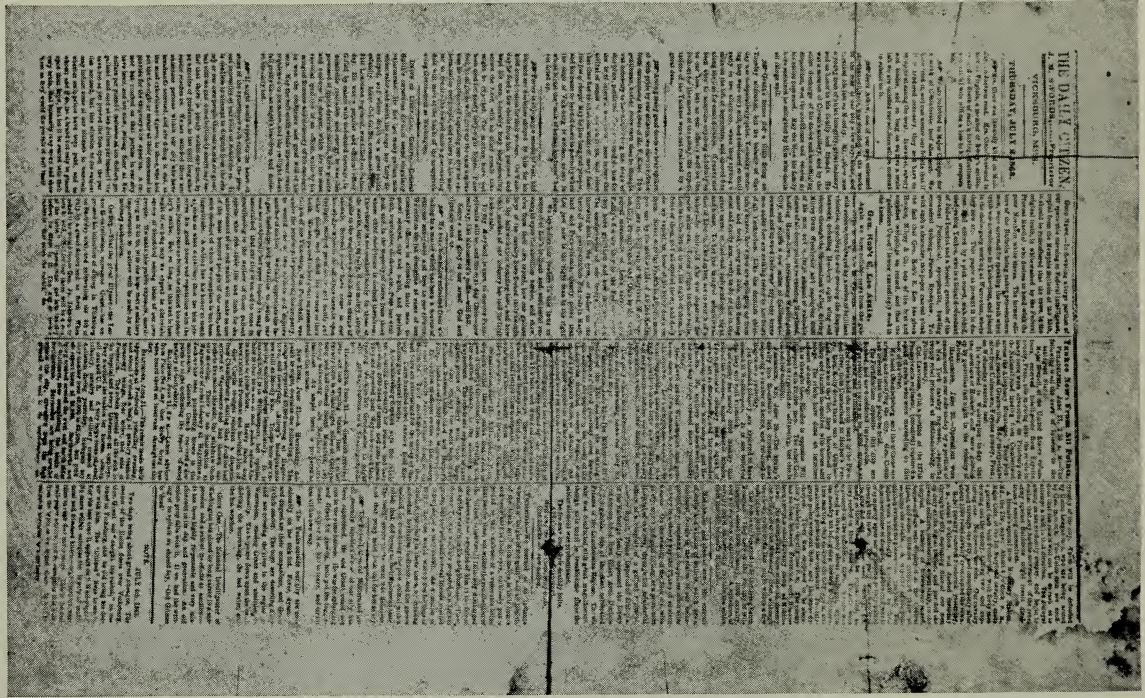
Swords must have read the handwriting on the wallpaper, because that issue, June 18, 1863, is one of the six numbers of *The Citizen* now known to exist which were published on that



medium. Like those of June 16, 20, 27, and 30, it was a single sheet of four columns printed on the blank side. The series reached a noteworthy climax a few days later. On July 2, just before the capitulation of the imprisoned city, *The Citizen* appeared again on wallpaper. Its columns relate with hopeful nonchalance the news of local casualties and food profiteering, praises mule steak as "sweet, savory and tender," and reports cheerfully:

> On Dit.—That the great Ulysses—the Yankee Generalissimo, surnamed Grant—has expressed his intention of dining in Vicksburg on Saturday next, and celebrating the 4th of July by a grand dinner and so forth. When asked if he would invite Gen. Jo. Johnston to join he said, "No! for fear there will be a row at the table." Ulysses must get into the city before he dines in it. The way to cook a rabbit is "first to catch the rabbit," &.

It was then that the beleaguered Swords, despite his airy taunts, gave up the editorial ghost. On July 3 Pemberton and Grant agreed on the terms of a truce. Next day Blue soldiers marched into a city whose reserves of food were as depleted as was its paper.



Most famous of all the wallpaper issues of Southern newspapers during the period of newsprint scarcity was that of The *{Vicksburg, Mississippi}* Daily Citizen *for July 2 and 4, 1863. Published on the first date by a Confederate editor, the same paper was reissued by Federal soldier-printers two days later when the besieged city fell. The "note" inserted by the victors at the bottom of the fourth column provides a good-natured rebuttal for the last paragraph of column two.*

Now the property of a parochial school, the building shown above was the city headquarters of Gen. John C. Pemberton, Confederate commander, during the 47-day siege of Vicksburg. It was occupied by Federal forces on the same day that printers of General Grant's army reissued The Daily Citizen.

Printers may not be ubiquitous, but certainly they are present in every army. Some of those under Grant soon found the offices of *The Citizen*, with its type still standing in the lone "form" of the issue of July 2. Two observations are supported readily by the evidence: (*a*) The contents of the paper were read carefully, and (*b*) there were some easy-humored typographical warriors among the conquerors of Vicksburg. By recourse to the abandoned type cases the newcomers composed a 14-line rebuttal. Its unanswerable repartee appended a good-natured postscript to one of the most arresting journalistic episodes of the American Civil War:

NOTE

July 4th, 1863.

Two days bring about great changes. The banner of the Union floats over Vicksburg. Gen. Grant has "caught the rabbit;" he has dined in Vicksburg, and he did bring his dinner with him. The "Citizen" lives to see it. For the last time it appears on "Wall-paper." No more will it eulogize the luxury of mule-meat and fricasseed kitten—urge Southern warriors to such diet never-more. This is the last wall-paper edition, and is, excepting this note, from the types as we found them. It will be valuable hereafter as a curiosity.

Using precious scraps of Swords' wallpaper remnants, the visitors printed an undetermined number of copies of a "July 2–4" edition, one of the most novel "replates" ever run through a press. Three designs of paper are found among the known originals, but more than 30 reprints have appeared since 1863. Henry S. Parsons, Chief of the Periodical Division of the Library of Congress, has made a searching study of them[12] in order to establish nine unerring typographical tests for distinguishing the genuine from the various souvenir copies. Exuberant collectors, he explains,[13] still send "discoveries" to him for examination, only to learn that they are somewhat unfaithful imitations.

Supplementing typographical clues are those provided by the design of the paper itself. That of the original in the

Library of Congress is described with studied precision by Mr. Parsons:

"A large brocade pattern in faded red-purple over a scroll design in faded rose on a cream background."

Altogether, the historical record appears to uphold the forecast made July 4, 1863, by the waggish Federals who predicted that *The Citizen* "will be valuable hereafter as a curiosity." It is even more valuable, however, as a revealing footnote to an interesting page of America's national record, for it substantiates the validity of the warning sounded in 1860 by *The New Orleans Bulletin* that ink and paper, as well as guns and swords, are indispensable items in the *matériel* of war.

Notes

[1] André Blum, *On the Origin of Paper* (Harry Miller Lydenberg, trans., R. R. Bowker Company, New York, 1934), 17.

[2] *Ibid.*, 23.

[3] H. A. Maddox, *Paper, Its History, Sources and Manufacture* (Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, London, n. d.), 64.

[4] Blum, *op. cit.*, 35.

[5] Dard Hunter, *Papermaking through Eighteen Centuries* (William Edwin Rudge, New York, 1930), 36. This author explains (p. 232) how a fifteenth century mosquito is preserved in a sheet of his collection of paper.

[6] Mary E. Wheelock, *Paper, Its History and Development* (American Library Association, Chicago, 1928), 7.

[7] James Melvin Lee, *History of American Journalism* (Houghton Mifflin and Company, Boston and New York, 1917), 69, 97.

[8] George Henry Payne, *History of Journalism in the United States* (D. Appleton and Company, New York, 1920), 203.

[9] Lee, *op. cit.*, 305.

[10] Wheelock, *op. cit.*, 8.

[11] "Wall-paper Newspapers of the Civil War," *Bibliographical Essays, A Tribute to Wilberforce Eames* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1924), 203–209.

[12] "Wall-Paper Editions of the Vicksburg 'Daily Citizen,'" *Antiques*, Vol. XXV, No. 3, March 1934, 97–98.

[13] Personal interview, November 9, 1939.

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